

Speech – Synod AGM 2010 (Mataura)

When the Moderator rang me last month to ask if I would speak here today, I said – Oh thanks very much – why don't you ring me next month? He just laughed. I asked him on what topic, his reply was 'anything brother – you know?' So that's my topic today is "anything brother you know", and if at the end of my ramblings you feel confused and wondering what's going on, and want to throw some stones at someone – I guess that's what Moderators are for.

Anything brother you know.....

The first thing I know is that this is an historic weekend for the Synod, especially for the Pacific Islanders in the Synod area, with Tau now being inducted as the first ever Pacific Island Moderator of the Synod of Otago and Southland. You will be interested to know that altogether, there have been 34 ministers of Pacific Island origin who have ministered in the Synod area over a period of the last 40 years. The first was Vaomnu Lima in 1969 at the PI church in Invercargill. Of that 34, 12 served in Pacific Island parishes, and the other 22 held positions in Palagi parishes, including in that number are 3 people who served on the Theological Hall staff and one other held the position of Youth Worker in the Southland Presbytery. Back in the 70s, there were only two PI ministers (same parish). From 2, it went up to 16 in the 80s, 17 in the 90s and since the turn of the century it dropped to 11. Currently, we have 8 active PI ministers in the Synod area, including one who is semi-retired. So you see the trend. By ethnicity, of the 34, 24 have been of Samoan decent, 9 Cook Islanders and 1 Niuean. The longest serving PI minister in the Synod area, guess who it is, is our very first PI Moderator. So even if his organisation may leave a bit to be desired, I say seniority, endurance and good looks have certainly made up for it. Well deserved!!

Anything brother you know...

The second thing I know is that the first group of PIs to join the Presbyterian church in the Synod area was a group that came from what used to be the congregational church at Moray Place. They merged with First Church Dunedin back in 1966 when their church closed its doors—they were mainly Samoans and a small number of Cook Islanders. That occasion heralded the beginning of a multicultural journey at First that continues to the present time, and who would have thought that we would ever see a Pacific Islander as Senior Minister at First Dunedin with Tokerau Joseph. (Cook Islanders seem to have all the best positions in the south??) The church has come a long way and isn't that wonderful to see. Pouiva Fuamatu was the first PI minister there during Ian Cairn's time, in fact it was Ian I was told who instigated the move and pushed for a PI minister to be appointed on a trial basis with a review after 3 years. Pouiva completed his term and was soon followed by Henry Wichman, and then Tokerau Joseph who as I said is the incumbent Senior Minister.

The fact is, we wouldn't have seen such progress being made without the leadership and support of people like Ian Cairns, Dennis Povey and Martin Baker, whose ministries were much appreciated by the PIs at First. There were others before them who I'm sure also had much to offer. In fact those who had the vision in the beginning to enable the merger to take place ought to be congratulated, a decision which for a historical mono-cultural church may not have been easy to make, particularly so at a time when First was probably thriving. There is always a natural tendency to guard and protect what we've got when things are going well. So really it required a certain degree of radical hospitality on First's part to make it happen and they did. But all journeys provide a source for stories. Some of these stories contain elements of paternalism and racism and some are stories of joy and transformation.

I was told that the Samoan group alone at the beginning of the merger in 1966 consisted of about 400 people before it began to suffer a series of splits. The first major split happened sometime in the late 70s when almost half of that number left to set-up what is now the Samoan Congregational Christian Church. The second split happened not long after that, when a good number of people left to set-up what is currently the Samoan Methodist Church. The third split took place in the early 80s, when a number of Samoan theological students led a walk out to form a separate PI congregation which gathered for worship initially at what used to be the St Stephens Church, now the Chinese Church. That congregation is now

known as the North Dunedin PI Church. Both First and North Dunedin have Samoan and Cook Island families in their congregations. The PI church in Invercargill doesn't. In actual fact it once had both Samoan and Cook Island families, but the Cook Islanders walked out sometime during the 90s and some of them I believe are now actively involved at St Andrews Invercargill. So the journey has not been all plain sailing. However it is not all bad news, that while the numbers of Samoan families in PI parishes are dwindling the Cook Island congregations are experiencing a renewed and positive growth in numbers, and we saw a clear evidence of that last night. Not only is there numerical growth there, but spiritual growth as well which I believe has come about due to the strength and success of their Uapous. Also the Cook Islanders seem to be able to work together across churches better than the Samoans have been in the Synod area. The Samoans in the South Island used to gather once a year over a weekend for their Faletolus and that used to be great occasions of cultural activities, Bible studies, and worship. The last time that happened was about 8 years ago. Currently there is only a handful of Samoan families worshipping at First, North Dunedin and Invercargill. I think First and North Dunedin churches are blessed not only because of the strength of their Cook Island congregations, but also because they have a resident minister at hand. The Invercargill PI church does not have that luxury, and due to a number of other factors as well, they are having to rethink their future as a congregation.

Anything brother you know....

The steady decline in Samoan congregations over the years have been by and large due to the lack of employment availability in the South. As well as that, and this is a real headache for the Samoans in PI churches, is that the Samoan Churches, like the Congregational, Methodist etc., are quite well established now in the Synod area, and there is always the tendency with some people to go there. This often happens when people are unhappy in the PI church for whatever reason. In regards to new Samoan migrants who move into the area, they are most likely to go to these churches than join a PI church. Incidentally, I was talking to Nimarota last night about that same issue, and he said it's doubly hard work these days to attract new Samoan families let alone keep what you've got, and he is hanging in there -just. A minister is an important factor in the success of any parish, particularly so in a PI parish. The minister has a defined place and role within the structure and organisation of Pacific communities. There is a strongly covenantal relationship between the community and minister – with the minister's well-being reflecting directly on the mana of the community. There are always issues of viability, because there is no such thing as a part-time PI minister in a PI church. That's more a cultural issue than an employment issue, because in my experience growing up as a pk, if a PI minister in that situation is really worth their salt, people will look after them.

We've also had a marked decline in PI ministers working in palagi parishes in the Synod area. Currently there are 3 PI ministers in Dunedin, one at Winton, 3 in the Maitua area. Just recently, for 3 months up till the end of last January, we had 4 PI ministers out of 7 in the Presbytery, which prompted a comment – tongue in cheek of course- from our clerk, John Willis saying – 'there appears to be a PI take over of the Maitua Presbytery at present.'

It's fascinating to see where PI ministers have ministered in the Synod area: Kurow, Waipawa, Stirling-Kaitangata, Lawrence, Heriot, Pukerau, Centre Bush, Forest Hill, Oteramika-Kennington, Dunedin, Invercargill, Maitua. They have been all over the show. The current drop in numbers of ministers in the Synod area, I believe is due to the lack of ministers available. There aren't the same big numbers going for assessment as it used to be. But I think the decline also reflects the social and economic changes affecting communities and churches in recent times. Churches today are being more specific when it comes to calling a minister, hence the extended period some parishes are now having to spend in vacancy trying to look for the right man or woman. I say, blessed are parishes who are able to afford a minister, because there are many parishes without one because they couldn't afford one. Is there something we could do together to assist those parishes, especially in situations where there is real potential for church growth, but the resources aren't there to do what needs to be done. Perhaps that's a question the Southern Presbytery and the Synod might like to chew over.

Anything brother you know....

As you saw last night culture and language are inseparable in Plders expression of faith and worship. Is it the church's role to preserve the integrity of any particular culture? I'm not sure about preserving, but welcoming, certainly. I believe culture is part of God's gift to humankind. I don't want to dwell on what is and what isn't culture. Culture to me is a multi faceted word, but all its faces together make up the symbolic and expressive dimension of social life; some of which we steer and control by our deliberate words and actions, but most of which we aren't aware of and we can't control alone. The hard part for most churches is that they are not sure they have a culture. A creed, yes. Forms of worship and music and spirituality that they're proud of, certainly. But a culture in the same sense that Samoans or Cook Islanders has a culture; or even the All Blacks or McDonalds has a culture. Ok the word hardly fits easily into our theological vocabulary. But the fact is, when it comes to the church's mission, we are a culture alongside all the others that people choose to belong to or choose to walk away from. We're either in dialogue or dispute with those other cultures, or we're only talking to ourselves, and therefore not in mission at all. That's not all we do as churches, but let me say this, culture is as fundamental a part of our reality as our budgets and bricks and mortar. But because it works in symbolic and expressive terms, culture is so much harder to assess and control than other parts. Cultures change, there's no doubt about that. The Samoans aren't adapting and competing as well as they should be in the market place for attention and commitment. Where churches don't take hold of their cultures, reforming, rejigging, readjusting – to accommodating the changing needs of people, they will wither and they will disappear. That's the on-going struggle not just for PI churches, but all churches.

Moderator... Papa Tau... brother.... that's everything I know.

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